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SUBJECT: PM MALIKI ON SISTANI MEETING, ELECTIONS, SFA, AND  
TAWAFUQ RETURN

Classified By: Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: In a May 23 meeting, Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki told the Ambassador that Grand Ayatollah Sistani is generally supportive of a long-term security agreement with the USG and is keenly interested in upcoming provincial elections. Sistani told the PM he will issue a public statement encouraging people to vote but will not endorse specific parties or allow them to use his photo or name in their campaigns. After the Ambassador noted that GOI and MNF-I security experts and UNAMI officials believe election security and integrity can best be served by holding provincial polls on a single day rather than the staggered schedule Maliki has publicly endorsed, Maliki responded that no decisions have been taken on this matter but electoral registration fraud and police unreliability are major concerns. On SFA/SOFA talks, the PM expressed satisfaction with progress so far and suggested that the two sides air all points of agreement and contention, adding that any final agreement must address Iraq's unique circumstances. He said he would ask President Talabani to convene a meeting of the Political Council for National Security (PCNS) so the political leadership could be briefed (the PCNS met May 26). Maliki acknowledged that ongoing security operations in Sadr City and Mosul are going well, noting that he is pressing GOI ministries to do better in providing services and employment in the wake of a similarly successful security operation in Basrah. Maliki attributed the most recent delay in Tawafuq's return to the cabinet to intra-Sunni wrangling but expressed hope that the matter could be resolved prior to the upcoming International Compact with Iraq meeting in Stockholm. He said he would travel to Italy at the invitation of the Pope, and the Ambassador noted this would be an excellent opportunity for the PM to show concern for Iraqis of all faiths. End Summary.

May 22 Sistani Meeting Read-Out  
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12. (C) Maliki said he had a very productive May 22 meeting in Najaf with Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who told the PM he is interested in the long-term security agreement with the USG and then pressed Maliki for details on negotiations. Maliki confided he was surprised by the degree of Sistani's focus on agreement details, and said he had promised to send a follow-up team to brief the cleric. Maliki noted that Sistani had received inaccurate information about the agreement from non-GOI sources (read Iran) and was uneasy as a result, but the PM said the follow-up team would explain and clarify any wrong input Sistani had received. Sistani also expressed keen interest in upcoming provincial elections, telling the PM he will issue a public statement encouraging people to vote but will not endorse specific parties or allow them to use his photo or name in their campaigns. (Religious images and mosques, Sistani told the PM, should be separate from political campaigns.) Maliki said Sistani inquired whether the elections would use an open or closed list system, adding that the cleric agreed with him that the open list system is preferable because voters will know for whom they are voting. Maliki said Sistani expressed

displeasure with JAM and with Iran's actions in Iraq. In an apparent reference to ongoing GOI security operations, Maliki said Sistani is completely supportive of the principle that only GOI personnel may carry arms and he claimed that Sistani told him he advises people that it is religiously impermissible (haram) to oppose the GOI. At the same time, however, Sistani expressed concern over the killing of innocent civilians during security operations, and Maliki said he told the cleric he shared this concern.

#### Elections and Security Operations

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¶3. (C) Fingering a strand of prayer beads throughout the hour-long meeting, Maliki listened impassively as the Ambassador pointed out that GOI and MNF-I security experts and UNAMI officials believe election security and integrity can best be ensured by holding provincial polls on a single day rather than the staggered schedule Maliki has publicly endorsed. Maliki replied that no decisions had been taken on this matter ("it might be one day or elections over three days") and suggested that the matter might involve a province-by-province determination that takes into account concerns regarding security and electoral fraud. He listed Anbar province, Basrah, and Kirkuk as places of particular concern, noting the unreliability of local police (for example, he said the Maysan police are loyal to JAM while Anbar police are biased toward "Awakening" movements) and the high potential for voter registration fraud in Kirkuk. Maliki flagged electoral fraud and falsification of identity and electoral documents as a real concern and encouraged the USG and the UNAMI to work with IHEC to help address this

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issue.

¶4. (C) Maliki acknowledged that ongoing security operations in Sadr City and Mosul are going well, noting that Iraqi security forces are showing that they are self-sufficient in all areas except air support. When asked about GOI follow-up after the Basrah operation, Maliki replied that Safa al-Safi is coordinating GOI efforts there but has so far experienced problems in distributing reconstruction funds and providing public services and employment. The PM said he had ordered GOI service ministries to redouble efforts to address these issues. In reply to the Ambassador's question about whether Ahmad Chalabi still chaired a GOI committee dealing with provision of services, Maliki laughed and said Chalabi no longer has a formal GOI position but still churns out "propaganda."

#### SFA/SOFA

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¶5. (C) Maliki noted that he planned to draft a letter spelling out his concerns with respect to the SOFA and the SFA, but he wanted to address the PCNS first. He added that it was important for the two sides to air all points of contention so as to better frame issues and move forward. He also called attention to an upcoming trip by the GOI SOFA negotiating team to several countries which have entered into a SOFA with the USG. Maliki replied that while it will be beneficial for the GOI to learn how such agreements are implemented in other countries so that Iraq may "take the positive points," he warned that any final agreement must address Iraq's unique circumstances.

#### Tawafuq Return and Foreign Travel

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¶6. (C) In reply to a question about the state of Maliki's discussions with Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi over Tawafuq's return to the cabinet, Maliki attributed the most recent delay to intra-Sunni wrangling between Hashemi, Adnan al-Duleimi, and Khalaf al-Ayan over candidate names. He said CoR Speaker Mashadani had also inserted himself into this

process, and had warned Maliki that precipitate action without Sunni consensus could further inflame intra-Sunni rivalry which in turn might spill into the "Sunni street." The Ambassador urged Maliki to press ahead with a solution, noting that Tawafuq's return prior to the late-May International Compact with Iraq meeting in Stockholm would project a strong image of national unity.

17. (C) Maliki said he looked forward to meeting the Secretary on the margins of the Stockholm meeting. The Ambassador noted that Maliki had other European invitations, including from Germany, France and Italy, the latter including the Pope. A visit by the Iraqi PM to the two leading European critics of 2003 would be a very positive signal. The Ambassador noted that a Papal meeting would be a good opportunity for the PM to show concern for Iraqis of all faiths. He also urged more engagement with neighbors such as Turkey and Jordan. Maliki said he would visit Italy, but was less clear on France and Germany. Maliki noted that the GOI and Turkey are in discussions about a bilateral Joint Commission meeting in Baghdad. With regard to GOI-Turkey relations, the Ambassador noted that Frank Wisner had recently been appointed as the new USG Special Envoy on the PKK situation and would soon be traveling to the region to talk about new ideas to resolve the PKK issue.

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